751
[Lang (Andrew)]

PR4876
M63
K84

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2008 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation

http://www.archive.org/details/muchdarkerdays00langrich

MUCH DARKER DAYS

LONDON : PRINTED BY
SPOTTISWOODE AND CO., NEW-STREET SQUARE
AND PARLIAMENT STREET

MUCH DARKER DAYS

BY

A. HUGE LONGWAY

AUTHOR OF

'SCRAWLED BLACK' 'UNBOUND' 'THE MYSTERY OF PAUL TARGUS' ETC.

LONDON

LONGMANS, GREEN, AND CO.

1884

All rights reserved

PREFACE

A BELIEF that modern Christmas fiction is too cheerful in tone, too artistic in construction, and too original in motive, has inspired the author of this tale of middle-class life. He trusts that he has escaped, at least, the errors he deplores, and has set an example of a more seasonable and sensational style of narrative.

CONTENTS.

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	THE CURSE (REGISTERED).	1
II.	A VILLAIN'S BY-BLOW	11
III.	MES GAGES! MES GAGES!	20
IV.	AS A HATTER!	25
V.	THE WHITE GROOM	33
VI.	HARD AS NAILS	39
VII.	RESCUE AND RETIRE!	51
VIII.	LOCAL COLOUR	67
IX.	SAVED! SAVED!	76
X.	NOT TOO MAD, BUT JUST MAD ENOUGH .	81
XI.	A TERRIBLE TEMPTATION	88
XII.	JUDGE JUGGINS	96
XIII.	CLEARED UP	106

MUCH DARKER DAYS.

CHAPTER I.

THE CURSE (REGISTERED).

HEN this story of my life, or of such parts of it as are not deemed wholly unfit for publication, is read (and, no doubt, a public which devoured 'Scrawled Black' will stand almost anything), it will be found that I have sometimes acted without prim cautiousness — that I have, in fact, wallowed in crime. Stillicide and Mayhem (rare old crimes!) are child's play to *me*, who

have been an 'accessory after the fact!' In excuse, I can but plead two things—the excellence of the opportunity to do so, and the weakness of the resistance which my victim offered.

If you cannot allow for these, throw the book out of the railway-carriage window! You have paid your money, and to the verdict of your pale morality or absurd sense of art in fiction I am therefore absolutely indifferent. You are too angelic for me; I am too fiendish for you. Let us agree to differ.

I say nothing about my boyhood. Twenty-five years ago a poor boy—but no matter. *I* was that boy! I hurry on to the soaring period of manhood, 'when the strength, the nerve, the intellect is or should be at its height,' or *are* or should be at *their* height, if you *must* have grammar in a Christmas Annual. *My* nerve was at its height: I was thirty.

Yet, what was I then? A miserable moon-struck mortal, duly entitled to write M.D. (of Tarrytown College, Alaska) after my name—for the title of Doctor is useful in the profession—but with no other source of enjoyment or emotional recreation in a cold, casual world. Often and often have I written M.D. after my name, till the glowing pleasure palled, and I have sunk back asking, 'Has life, then, no more than this to offer?'

Bear with me if I write like this for ever so many pages; bear with me, it is such easy writing, and only thus can I hope to make you understand my subsequent and slightly peculiar conduct.

How rare was hers, the loveliness of the woman I lost—of her whose loss brought me down to the condition I attempt to depict!

How strange was her rich beauty! She was at once dark and fair—*la blonde et la*

brune! How different from the Spotted Girls and Two-headed Nightingales whom I have often seen exhibited, and drawing money too, as the types of physical imperfections! Warm Southern blood glowed darkly in one of Philippa's cheeks—the left; pale Teutonic grace smiled in the other—the right. Her mother was a fair blonde Englishwoman, but it was Old Calabar that gave her daughter those curls of sable wool, contrasting so exquisitely with her silken-golden tresses. Her English mother may have lent Philippa many exquisite graces, but it was from her father, a pure-blooded negro, that she inherited her classic outline of profile.

Philippa, in fact, was a natural arrangement in black and white. Viewed from one side she appeared the Venus of the Gold Coast, from the other she outshone the Hellenic Aphrodite. From any point of view she was an

extraordinarily attractive addition to the Exhibition and Menagerie which at that time I was running in the Midland Counties.

Her father, the nature of whose avocation I never thought it necessary to inquire into, was a sea cook on board a Peninsular and Oriental steamer. His profession thus prevented him from being a permanent resident in this, or indeed in any other country.

Our first meeting was brought about in a most prosaic way. Her mother consulted me professionally about Philippa's prospects. We did not at that time come to terms. I thought I might conclude a more advantageous arrangement if Philippa's *heart* was touched, if she would be mine. But she did not love me. Moreover, she was ambitious; she knew, small blame to her, how unique she was.

'The fact is,' she would observe when I pressed my suit, 'the fact is, I look higher

than a mere showman, even if he can write M.D. after his name.'

Philippa soon left the circuit 'to better herself.'

In a short time a telegram from her apprised me that she was an orphan.

I flew to where she lodged, in a quiet, respectable street, near Ratcliff Highway. She expressed her intention of staying here for some time.

'But alone, Philippa?'

(She was but eight-and-thirty).

'Not so much alone as you suppose,' she replied archly.

This should have warned me, but again I passionately urged my plea.

I offered most attractive inducements.

A line to herself in the bills! Everything found!

'Basil,' she observed, blushing in her usual

partial manner, 'you are a day after the fair.'

'But there are plenty of fairs,' I cried, 'all of which we attend regularly. What can you mean? Has another——'

'He *hev*,' said Philippa, demurely but decidedly.

'You are engaged?' She raised her lovely hand, and was showing me a gold wedding circlet, when the door opened, and a strikingly handsome man of some forty summers entered.

There was something written in his face (a dark contusion, in fact, under the left eye) which told me that he could not be a pure and high-souled Christian gentleman.

'Basil South, M.D.,' said Philippa, introducing us. 'Mr. Baby Farmer' (obviously a name of endearment), and again a rosy blush crept round her neck in the usual partial

manner, which made one of her most peculiar charms.

I bowed mechanically, and, amid a few dishevelled remarks on the weather, left the house the most disappointed showman in England.

'Cur, sneak, coward, villain!' I hissed when I felt sure I was well out of hearing. 'Farewell, farewell, Philippa!'

To drown remembrance and regret, I remained in town, striving in a course of what moralists call 'gaiety' to forget what I had lost.

How many try the same prescription, and seem rather to like it! I often met my fellow-patients.

One day, on the steps of the Aquarium, I saw the man whom I suspected of not being Philippa's husband.

'Who is that cove?' I asked.

'Him with the gardenia?' replied a friend,

idiomatically. 'That is Sir Runan Errand, the amateur showman—him that runs the Live Mermaid, the Missing Link, and Koot Hoomi, the Mahatma of the Mountain.'

'What kind of man is he?'

'Just about the usual kind of man you see generally here. Just about as hot as they make them. Mad about having a show of his own; crazed on two-headed calves.'

'Is he married?'

'If every lady who calls herself Lady Errand had a legal title to do so, the "Baronetage" would have to be extended to several supplementary volumes.'

And this was Philippa's husband!

What was he among so many?

My impulse was to demand an explanation from the baronet, but for reasons not wholly unconnected with my height and fighting weight, I abstained.

I did better.

I went to my hotel, called for the hotel book, and registered an oath, which is, therefore, copyright. I swore that in twenty-five years I would be even with him I hated. I prayed, rather inconsistently, that honour and happiness might be the lot of her I had lost. After that I felt better.

CHAPTER II.

A VILLAIN'S BY-BLOW.

PHILIPPA was another's! Life was no longer worth living. Hope was evaluated; ambition was blunted. The interest which I had hitherto felt in my profession vanished. All the spring, the elasticity seemed taken out of my two Bounding Brothers from the Gutta Percha coast. For months I did my work in a perfunctory manner. I added a Tattooed Man to my exhibition and a Two-headed Snake, also a White-eyed Botocudo, who played the guitar, and a pair of Siamese Twins, who were fired out of a double-barrelled cannon, and then did the lofty trapeze business. They drew, but success gave

me no pleasure. So long as I made money enough for my daily needs (and whisky was cheap), what recked I? My mood was none of the sweetest. My friends fell off from me; ay, they fell like nine-pins whenever I could get within reach of them. I was alone in the world.

You will not be surprised to hear it; the wretched have no friends. So things went on for a year. I became worse instead of better. My gloom deepened, my liver grew more and more confirmed in its morbid inaction. These are not lover's rhapsodies, they merely show the state of my body and mind, and explain what purists may condemn. In this condition I heard without hypocritical regret that a distant relative (a long-lost uncle) had conveniently left me his vast property. I cared only because it enabled me to withdraw from the profession. I disposed of my exhibition,

or rather I let it go for a song. I simply handed over the Tattooed Man, the Artillery Twins, and the Double-headed Serpent to the first-comer, who happened to be a rural dean. Far in the deeps of the country, near the little town of Roding, on a lonely highway, where no man ever came, I took a 'pike. Here I dwelt like a hermit, refusing to give change to the rare passers-by in carts and gigs, and attended by a handy fellow, William Evans, stolid as the Sphynx, which word, for reasons that may or may not appear later in this narrative, I prefer to spell with a *y*, contrary to the best authorities and usual custom.

It was midwinter, and midnight. My room lay in darkness. Heavy snow was falling. I went to the window and flattened my nose against the pane.

'What,' I asked myself, 'is most like a cat looking out of a window?'

'A cat looking in at a window,' answered a silvery voice from the darkness.

Flattened against the self-same pane was another nose, a woman's. It was the lovely organ of mixed architecture belonging to Philippa! With a low cry of amazement, I broke the pane: it was no idle vision, no case of the 'horrors;' the cold, cold nose of my Philippa encountered my own. The ice was now broken; she swept into my chamber, lovelier than ever in her strange unearthly beauty, and a new sealskin coat. Then she seated herself with careless grace, tilting back her chair, and resting her feet on the chimney-piece.

'Dear Philippa,' I exclaimed politely, 'how is your husband?'

'Husband! I have none,' she hissed. 'Tell me, Basil, did you ever hate a fellow no end?'

'Yes,' I answered, truly; for, like Mr. Carlyle, I just detested most people, and him who had robbed me of Philippa most of all.

'Do you know what he did, Basil? *He insisted on having a latch-key!* Did you ever hate a man?'

I threw out my arms. My heart was full of bitterness.

'He did more! He has refused to pay my last quarter's salary. Basil, didn't you ever hate a man?'

My brain reeled at these repeated outrages.

'And where are you staying at present, Philippa? I hope you are pretty comfortable?' I inquired, anxiously.

Philippa went on: 'My husband as was has chucked me. I was about to have a baby. I bored him. I was in the way—in the family-way. Basil, did you ever hate a fellow? If not, read this letter.'

She threw a letter towards me. She chucked it with all her old gracious dexterity. It was dated from Monte Carlo, and ran thus :—

'As we don't seem quite to hit it off, I think I may as well finish this business of our marriage. The shortest way to make things clear to your very limited intelligence is to assure you that you are not my wife at all. Before I married you I was the husband of the Live Mermaid. She has died since then, and I might have married you over and over again; but I was not quite so infatuated. I shall just run across and settle up about this little affair on Wednesday. As you are five miles from the station, as the weather is perfectly awful, as moreover I am a luxurious, self-indulgent baronet and as this story would never get on unless I walked, don't send to meet me. I would *rather* walk.'

Here was a pretty letter from a fond husband. 'But, ha! proud noble,' I whispered to my heart, 'you and me shall meet to-morrow.'

'And where are you staying, Philippa?' I repeated, to lead the conversation into a more agreeable channel.

'With a Mrs. Thompson,' she replied; 'a lady connected with Sir Runan.'

'Very well, let me call for your things to-morrow. I can pass myself off as your brother, you know.'

'My half-brother,' said Philippa, blushing, 'on the mother's side.'

The brave girl thought of *everything*. The child of white parents, I should have in vain pretended to be Philippa's full brother. They would not have believed me had I sworn it.

'Don't you think,' Philippa continued, as a sudden thought occurred to her, 'that as it is almost midnight and snowing heavily it would

be more proper for me to return to Mrs. Thompson's?'

There was no contesting this.

We walked together to the house of that lady, and at my suggestion Philippa sought her couch.

I sat down and awaited the advent of Mrs. Thompson. She soon appeared.

A woman of about five-and-thirty, with an aquiline face, and a long, dark, silky beard sweeping down to her waist. Whatever this woman's charms might have been for me when I was still in the profession, she could now boast of very few. Doubtless she had been in Sir Runan's show, and was one of his victims.

I apologised for the lateness of my call, and entered at once on business.

Mrs. Thompson remarked that 'my sister's health was not as it should be,'—not all she could wish.

'I do not wish to alarm you; no doubt you, her brother, are *used* to it; but, for a girl as mad as a hatter—well, I'll trouble you!'

'I myself can write M.D. after my name,' I replied, 'and you are related, I think, to Sir Runan Errand?'

'We are connections,' she said, not taking the point of my sarcasm. 'His conduct rarely astonishes me. When I found, however, that this lady, your sister, was his wife, I own, for once, I *was* surprised.'

Feeling that this woman had the better of it, with her calm, polished, highbred sarcasms, I walked back to the 'pike, full of hopes of a sweet revenge.

As, however, I had never spoken to a baronet before, I could not but fear that his lofty air of superior rank might daunt me, when we met to-morrow.

CHAPTER III.

MES GAGES! MES GAGES!

NEXT morning came, chill and grey, and reminded me that I had two duties. I was to wait at home till Philippa came over from Mrs. Thompson's, and I was also to hang about the road from the station, and challenge Sir Runan to mortal combat.

Can duties clash?

They can. They did!

The hours lagged slowly by, while I read Sir Runan's letter, read and re-read it, registered and re-registered (a pretty term of my own invention) this vow of vengeance.

Philippa's 'things'—her boxes with all her properties—arrived in due time.

Philippa did not.

I passed a distracted day, now bounding forth half way to the railway station to meet Sir Runan, now speeding back at the top of my pace to welcome Philippa at the 'pike.

As I knew not by what train Sir Runan would reach Roding, nor when Philippa might be looked for, I thus obtained exercise enough to make up for months of inaction.

Finally the last train was due.

It was now pitch-dark and snowing heavily, the very time which Philippa generally chose for a quiet evening walk.

I rushed half-way to Roding, changed my mind, headed back, and arrived at the 'pike.

'Has a lady called for me?' I asked the Sphynx.

'Now, *is* it likely, sir?' answered my fellow, with rough humour.

'Well, I must go and meet her,' I cried, and, hastily snatching a bull's-eye lantern and policeman's rattle from the Sphynx, I plunged into the darkness.

First I hurried to Mrs. Thompson's, where I learned that Philippa had just gone out for a stroll after a somewhat prolonged luncheon. This was like Philippa. I recognised that shrinking modesty which always made her prefer to veil her charms by walking about after nightfall.

Turning from Mrs. Thompson's, I felt the snow more sharply on my face. Furiously, blindly, madly it whirled here and drifted there.

Should I go for Sir Runan? Should I wait where I was? Should I whistle for a cab? Should I return to the 'pike?

Suddenly out of the snow came a peal of silvery laughter. Philippa waltzed gracefully by in a long ulster whitened with snow.

I detected her solely by means of my dark lantern.

I rushed on her, I seized her. I said, 'Philippa, come back with me!'

'No, all the fun's in the front,' shrieked Philippa. 'My quarter's salary! Oh, my last quarter's salary!'

With these wild words, like bullets from a Gatling gun rattling in my ears, I seized Philippa's hand.

Something fell, and would have rattled on the hard high road had it not been for the snow.

I stooped to pick up this shining object, and with one more wild yell of 'My quarter's salary!' Philippa waltzed again into the darkness.

Fatigued with the somewhat exhausting and unusual character of the day's performances, and out of training as I was, I could not follow her.

Mechanically, I still groped on the ground, and picked up a small chill object.

It was a latch-key! I thrust it in my pocket with my other keys.

Then a thought occurred to me, and I chucked it over the hedge, to serve as circumstantial evidence. Next I turned and went up the road, springing my rattle and flashing my bull's-eye lantern on every side, like Mr. Pickwick when he alarmed the scientific gentleman.

Suddenly, with a cry of horror, I stopped short. At my very feet, in the little circle of concentrated light thrown by the lantern, lay a white crushed, cylindrical mass.

That mass I had seen before in the warm summer weather—that mass, once a white hat, had adorned the brows of that masher!

It was Sir Runan's topper!

CHAPTER IV.

AS A HATTER!

ES, the white hat, lying there all battered and crushed on the white snow, must be the hat of Sir Runan!

Who else but the tigerish aristocrat that disdained the homely four-wheeler and preferred to walk five miles to his victim on this night of dread—who else would wear the gay gossamer of July in stormy December?

In that hat, thanks doubtless to its airy *insouciant* grace, he had won Philippa; in that hat he would have bearded her, defied her, and cast her off! The cruelty of man! The larger and bulkier crumpled heap which lay on the road a little beyond the hat, that heap with

all its outlines already blurred by snow, that heap must be the baronet himself!

Oh, but this was vengeance, swift, deadly vengeance!

But how, but how had she wreaked it? *She*, already my heart whispered *she!*

Was my peerless Philippa then a murderess?

Oh, say not so; call hers (ye would do so an she had been an Irish felon) 'the wild justice of revenge,' or the speedy execution of the outraged creditor.

Killed by Philippa!

Yes, and why? The answer was only too obvious. She must have gone forth to meet him, and to wring from him, by what means she might, that quarter's salary which the dastard had left unpaid. Then my thoughts flew to the door-key, the cause of that fierce family hatred which burned between Philippa and her

betrayer. That latch-key she had wrested from him, it had fallen from her hand, and I—I had pitched it into space!

Overcome with emotion, I staggered in the direction of the 'pike. All the way, in the blinding, whirling snow, I traced the unobliterated prints of a small fairy foot.

This was a dreary comfort! Philippa had gone before me; the prints of the one small foot were hers. She must, then, have hopped all the way! Could such a mode of progression be consistent with a feeling of guilt? Could remorse step so gaily?

My man William, the Sphynx, opened the door to me. Assuming a natural air, I observed:—

'Miss South is at home?'

'Yes, sir. Just come in, sir.'

'Where is she now?'

'Well, sir, she just is on the rampage.

"I'll make 'is fur fly," she up and sez, sez she, when she heard as you was hout. Not a nice young lady for a small tea-party, sir,' he added, lowering his voice; 'a regular out-and-outer your sister is, to be sure.'

The Sphynx, in spite of his stolidity, occasionally ventured upon some slight liberty when addressing me.

I made a gay rejoinder, reflecting on the character of his own unmarried female relations, and entered the room.

Philippa was sitting on the lofty, dark oak chimney-piece, with her feet dangling unconventionally over the fireplace. The snow, melting from her little boots and her hair, had made a large puddle on the floor.

I came up and stood waiting for her to speak, but she kept pettishly swinging her small feet, as one who, by the action, means to signify displeasure.

'Philippa,' I said sternly, 'speak to me.'

'Well, here's a gay old flare-up!' cried Philippa, leaping from the chimney-piece, and folding her arms fiercely akimbo.

'Who are you? Where's the baby? *You* a brother; you're a pretty brother! Is *this* the way you keep 'pointments with a poor girl? Who killed the baby? You did—you *all* did it.'

Her words ran one into the other, as with an eloquence, which I cannot hope to reproduce (and indeed my excellent publisher would not permit it for a moment), she continued to dance derisively at me, and to heap reproaches of the most vexatious and frivolous nature on my head.

'Philippa,' I remarked at last, 'you frivol too much.'

A sullen look settled on her face, and, with the aid of a chair, she reseated herself

in her former listless, drooping attitude upon the chimney-piece.

On beholding these symptoms, on hearing these reproaches, a great wave of joy swept over my heart.

Manifestly, Philippa was indeed, as Mrs. Thompson had said, 'as mad as a hatter.' Whatever she might have done did not count, and was all right. We would plead insanity.

She had fallen a victim to a mental disease, the source of which I have no hesitation in saying has not yet been properly investigated. So far as I know there is no monograph on the subject, or certainly I would have read it up carefully for the purpose of this Christmas Annual. I cannot get on without a mad woman in my stories, and if I can't find a proper case in the medical books, why, I invent one, or take it from the French. This one I have invented.

The details of Philippa's case, though of vast and momentous professional interest, I shall reserve for a communication to some journal of Science.

As for the treatment, I measured out no less than sixty drops of laudanum, with an equal amount of very old brandy, in a separate vessel. But preparing a dose and getting a patient like this to take it, are two different things. I succeeded by the following device.

I sent for some hot water and sugar and a lemon. I mixed the boiling element carefully with the brandy, and (separately) with the laudanum.

I took a little of the *former* beverage. Philippa with unaffected interest beheld me repeat this action again and again.

A softer, more contented look stole over her beautiful face. I seized the moment. Once

more I pressed the potion (the *other* potion) upon her.

This time successfully.

Softly murmuring 'More sugar,' Philippa sank into a sleep—sound as the sleep of death.

Philippa might awaken, I hoped, with her memory free from the events of the day.

As Princess Toto, in the weird old Elizabethan tragedy, quite forgot the circumstance of her Marriage, so Philippa might entirely forget her Murder.

When we remember what women are, the latter instance of obliviousness appears the more probable.

CHAPTER V.

THE WHITE GROOM.

I SHALL, I am sure, scarcely be credited when I say that Philippa's unconsciousness lasted for sixteen days. I had wished her to sleep so long that the memory of her deeds on the awful night should fade from her memory. She seemed likely to do so.

All the time she slept I felt more and more secure, because the snow never ceased falling.

It must have been thirty feet deep above all that was mortal of Sir Runan Errand.

The deeper the better.

The baronet was never missed by any one, curious to say. No inquiries were made; and this might have puzzled a person less un-

acquainted than myself with the manners of baronets and their friends.

Sometimes an awful fascination led me along the road where I had found the broken, battered mass.

I fancied I could see the very drift where the thing lay, and a dreary temptation (dating probably from the old times when I had some wild beasts in the exhibition) urged me to 'stir it up with a long pole.' I resisted it, and, bitterly weeping, I turned away towards Philippa's bedside.

As I walked I met Mrs. Thompson.

'Does she hate him?' she asked suddenly.

'Forgiveness is a Christian virtue,' I answered evasively.

I could not trust this woman.

'Listen,' she said, 'and try to understand. If I thought she hated him, I would tell her something. If she thought you hated them, he

would tell me something. If ye or you thought he hated her, I would tell him something. I will wait and see.'

She left me to make the best (which was not much) of her enigmatical words.

She was evidently a strange woman.

I felt that she was mixed up in Sir Runan's early life, and that we were mixed up in Sir Runan's early death—in fact, that everything was very mixed indeed.

She came back. 'Give me your name and college,' she said, 'not necessarily for publication,' and I divined that she had once been a proctor at Girton. I gave her my address at the public-house round the corner, and we parted, Mrs. Thompson whispering that she 'would write.'

On reaching home I leaped to Philippa's apartment.

A great change had come over her.

She was awake!

I became at once a prey to the wildest anxiety.

The difficulties of my position for the first time revealed themselves to me.

If Philippa remained insane, how was I to remove her from the scene of her—alas! of her crime?

If Philippa had become sane, her position under my roof was extremely compromising.

Again, if she were insane, a jury might acquit her, when the snow melted and revealed all that was left of the baronet.

But, in that case, what pleasure or profit could I derive from the society of an insane Philippa?

Supposing, on the other hand, she was sane, then was I not an 'accessory after the fact,' and liable to all the pains and penalties of such a crime?

Here the final question arose and shook its ghostly finger at me : 'Can a sane man be an accessory after the fact in a murder committed by an insane woman ?'

So far as I know, there is no monograph on this subject, or certainly I would have consulted it for the purpose of this Christmas Annual.

All these questions swept like lightning through my brain, as I knelt by Philippa's bedside, and awaited her first word.

'*Bon jour, Philippine,*' I said.

'Basil,' she replied, 'where am I ?'

'Under my roof—your brother's roof,' I said.

'Brother ! oh, stow that bosh !' she said, turning languidly away.

There could not be a doubt of it, Philippa was herself again !

I rose pensively, and wandered out towards the stables.

Covered with white snow over a white macintosh, I met by the coach-house door William, the Sphynx.

THE WHITE GROOM!

Twiddling a small object, *a door-key of peculiar make*, in his hand, he grinned stolidly at me.

'She's a rum un, squire, your sister, she be,' chuckled the Sphynx.

'William,' I said, 'go to Roding, and bring back two nurses, even if they have to hire twenty drags to draw them here. And, William, bring some drugs in the drags.'

By setting him on this expedition I got rid of the Sphynx. Was he a witness? *He was certainly acquainted with the nature of an oath!*

CHAPTER VI.

HARD AS NAILS.

OF course when I woke next morning my first thought was of Philippa; my second was of the weather. Always interesting, meteorological observation becomes peculiarly absorbing when it entirely depends on the thermometer whether you shall, or shall not, be arrested as an accessory after the fact, or (as lawyers say) *post-mortem*. My heart sank into my boots, or rather (for I had not yet dressed) into my slippers, when I found that, for the first time during sixteen days, the snow had ceased falling. I threw up the sash, the cold air cut me like a knife. Mechanically I threw up the sponge; it struck hard against

the ceiling, and fell back a mass of brittle, jingling icicles, so severe was the iron frost that had bound it.

I gathered up a handful of snow from the window-sill. It crumbled in my fingers like patent camphorated tooth-powder, for which purpose I instantly proceeded to use it. Necessity is the mother of invention. Then I turned, as a final test, to my bath. Oh, joy! it was frozen ten inches thick! No tub for me to-day! I ran downstairs gleefully, and glanced at the thermometer outside my study window. Hooray, it registered twenty degrees below zero! It registered! That reminded me of my oath! I registered it once more, regardless of legal expenses.

My spirits rose as rapidly as the glass had fallen. The wind was due east, not generally a matter for indecent exultation.

But while the wind was due east, so

long the frost would last, and that white mass on the roadside would remain *in statu quo*.

So long, Philippa was safe.

After that her fate, and mine too, depended on the eccentricities of a jury, the chartered libertinism of an ermined judge, the humour of the law, on a series of points without precedent concerning which no monograph had as yet been written; and, as a last desperate resource, on the letters of a sympathetic British public in the penny papers. The penny papers, the criminal's latest broadsheet anchor! Under the exasperating circumstances, Philippa remained as well as could be expected. She spoke little, but ate and drank a good deal. Day after day the brave black frost lasted, and the snowy grave hid all that it would have been highly inconvenient for me to have discovered. The heavens themselves seemed to be shielding us and working for us. Do

the heavens generally shield accessories after the fact, and ladies who have shortened the careers of their lords? These questions I leave to the casuist, the meteorologist, the compilers of weather forecasts, and other constituted authorities on matters connected with theology and the state of the barometer.

I have not given the year in which these unobtrusive events occurred.

Many who can remember that mighty fall of snow, exceeding aught in the recollection of the oldest inhabitant, and the time during which the frost kept it on the earth, will be able and willing to fix the date.

I do not object to their thus occupying their leisure with chronological research.

If they feel at all baffled by the difficulties of the problem, I will give them an additional 'light': *Since that year there has been no weather like it.*

Answers may be sent to the Puzzle Editor of *Truth*.

Day by day Philippa grew better and better. This appears to be the usual result of excessively seasonable weather acting on a constitution previously undermined by bigamy, murder, and similar excesses.

I spare all technical summary of the case, sufficient to say that this was one of the rare instances in which the mind, totally unhinged, is restored to its balance by sixty drops of laudanum taken fasting, with a squeeze of lemon, after violent exercise on an empty stomach.

The case is almost unique; but, had things fallen out otherwise, this story could never have been got ready in time to romp in before the other Christmas Annuals.

Matters would have become really *too* complicated!

As Philippa recovered, it became more and more evident even to the most dilatory mind that the sooner she left the scene of her late unrehearsed performance the better.

The baronet had not yet been missed—indeed, he never *was* missed, and that is one of the very most remarkable points in the whole affair.

When he *did* come to be missed, however, he would naturally be sought for in the neighbourhood of the most recent and attractive of his wives.

That wife was Philippa.

Everything pointed to instant flight.

But how was I to get Philippa to see this? *Ex hypothesi* she knew nothing of the murder. On the other hand, all her pure, though passionate nature would revolt against sharing my home longer than was necessary. But would not the same purity prevent her from accompanying me abroad?

Brother and sister we had called ourselves but Philippa had never been the dupe of this terminology.

Besides, was not her position, in any case, just a little shady?

An idea now occurred to me for the first time. Many men would long ere now have asked their mothers to *chaperon* them. It flashed across me that I had a mother.

He who says 'mother' says '*chaperon*.'

I would take my Philippa to my mother. Philippa was now completely convalescent.

I can only attribute my lingering to the sense of fatality that all things would come round and be all square.

Love I had laid aside till I could see my way a little clearer in the certainly perplexing combination of circumstances.

Nevertheless, Philippa, I say it advisedly, seemed to me a good deal more pure and

innocent than when we first met. True, she had been secretly married to a man under a name which she knew to be false.

True, she had given birth to a baby whose later fate remains a mystery even to this day. True, her hands were stained with the blood of Sir Runan Errand.

But why speak of Redistribution, why agitate for Woman's Suffrage, if trifles like these are to obstruct a girl's path in society?

Philippa's wrongs had goaded her to madness. Her madness was responsible for the act. She was not mad any longer. Therefore she was not responsible. Therefore Philippa was innocent.

If she became mad again, then it would be time to speak of guilt.

But would these arguments be as powerful with a British as they certainly would have proved with a French jury?

Once Philippa seemed to awaken to a sense of the situation.

Once she asked me 'How she came to my home that night?'

'You came *out of* the whirling snow, and *in* a high state of delirium,' I answered, epigrammatically.

'I thought I came on foot,' she replied, dreamily.

'But, Basil,' she went on, 'what afterwards? What's the next move, my noble sportsman?'

What, indeed! Philippa had me there.

Clearly it was time to move.

In order to avert suspicion, I thought it was better not to shut up my house.

For the same purpose, I did a little in crime on my own account.

A man tires of only being an accessory.

William, the Sphynx, obviously 'was in the

know,' as sporting characters say. Was in the know of what was in the snow! I must silence William.

I took my measures quietly.

First I laid in two dozen of very curious pale sherry at half-a-crown.

I bought each bottle at a separate shop in a different disguise (making twenty-four in all), that my proceedings might not attract attention.

I laid down the deadly fluid with all proper caution in the cellar.

At parting from William I gave him five shillings and the cellar key, telling him to be very careful, and await my instructions.

I knew well that long before my 'instructions' could reach him, the faithful William would be speechless, and far beyond the reach of human science.

His secret would sleep with the White Groom.

Then Philippa and I drove to town, Philippa asking me conundrums, like Nebuchadnezzar.

'There was something I dreamed of. Tell me what it was?' she asked.

But, though better informed than the Wise Men and Soothsayers of old, I did not gratify her unusual desire.

On reaching town I drove straight to the hotel at which my mother was staying.

It was one of those highly-priced private hotels in the New Cut.

As, however, I had no desire to purchase this place of entertainment, the exorbitant value set on it by its proprietors did not affect my spirits.

In a few minutes I had told my mother all save two things: the business of the

baby, and the fate which had overtaken Sir Runan.

With these trifling exceptions she knew all.

To fall into Philippa's arms was, to my still active parent, the work of a moment.

Then Philippa looked at me with an artless wink.

'Basil, my brother, you are really too good.'

Ah, how happy I should have felt could that one dark night's work have been undone!

CHAPTER VII.

RESCUE AND RETIRE!

HITHERTO I have said little about my mother, and I may even seem to have regarded that lady in the light of a temporary convenience. My readers will, however, already have guessed that *my* mother was no common character.

Consider for a moment the position which she so readily consented to occupy.

The trifling details about the sudden decease of Sir Runan and the affair of the baby, as we have seen, I had thought it better *not* to name to her.

Matters, therefore, in her opinion, stood thus:—

Philippa was the victim of a baronet's wiles.

When off with the new love, she had promptly returned and passed a considerable time under the roof of the old love; that is, of myself.

Then I had suddenly arrived with this eligible prospective daughter-in-law at my mother's high-priced hotel, and I kept insisting that we should at once migrate, we three, to foreign parts—the more foreign the better.

I had especially dilated on the charms of the scenery and the salubrity of the climate in *countries where there was no extradition treaty with England.*

Even if there was nothing in these circumstances to arouse the watchful jealousy of a mother, it must be remembered that, as a *chaperon*, she did seem to come a little late in the day.

'As you have lived together so long without me,' some parents would have observed, 'you can do without me altogether.'

None of these trivial objections occurred to my mother.

She was good-nature itself.

Just returned from a professional tour on the Continent (she was, I should have said, in the profession herself, and admirably filled the *exigeant* part of Stout Lady in a highly respectable exhibition), my mother at once began to pack up her properties and make ready to accompany us.

Never was there a more good-humoured *chaperon*. If one of us entered the room where she was sitting with the other, she would humorously give me a push, and observing 'Two is company, young people, three is none,' would toddle off with all the alacrity that her figure and age permitted.

I learned from inquiries addressed to the *Family Herald* (correspondence column) that the Soudan was then, even as it is now, the land safest against English law. Spain, in this respect, was reckoned a bad second.

The very next day I again broached the subject of foreign travel to my mother. It was already obvious that the frost would not last for ever. Once the snow melted, once the crushed mass that had been a baronet was discovered, circumstantial evidence would point to Philippa. True, there was no one save myself who could positively *swear* that Philippa had killed Sir Runan. Again, though I could positively swear it, my knowledge was only an inference of my own. Philippa herself had completely forgotten the circumstance. But the suspicions of the Bearded Woman and of the White Groom

were sure to be aroused, and the Soudan I resolved to seek without an hour's delay.

I reckoned without my hostess.

My mother at first demurred.

'You certainly don't look well, Basil. But why the Soudan?'

'A whim, a sick man's fancy. Perhaps because it is not so very remote from Old Calabar, the country of Philippa's own father. Mother, tell me, how do you like her?'

'She is the woman you love, and however shady her antecedents, however peculiar her style of conversation, she is, she must be, blameless. To say more, after so short an acquaintance, might savour of haste and exaggeration.'

A woman's logic!

'Then you *will* come to the Soudan with us to-morrow?'

'No, my child, further south than Spain I will *not* go, not this journey!'

Here Philippa entered.

'Well, what's the next news, old man?' she said.

'To Spain, to-morrow!'

'Rain, rain,
Go to Spain,
Be sure you don't come back again.'

sang sweet Philippa, in childish high spirits.

I had rarely seen her thus!

Alas, Philippa's nursery charm against the rain proved worse than unavailing.

That afternoon, after several months of brave black frost, which had gripped the land in its stern clasp, the rain began to fall heavily.

The white veil of snow gradually withdrew.

All that night I dreamed of the white snow slowly vanishing from the white hat.

Next morning the snow *had* vanished, and the white hat must have been obvious to the wayfaring man though a fool.

Next morning, and the next, and the next, found me still in London.

Why?

My mother was shopping!

Oh, the awful torture of having a gay mother shopping the solemn hours away, when each instant drew her son nearer to the doom of an accessory after the fact!

My mother did not object to travel, but she *did* like to have her little comforts about her.

She occupied herself in purchasing—

A water-bed.

A *boule*, or hot-water bottle.

A portable stove.

A travelling kitchen-range.

A medicine chest.

A complete set of Ollendorff.

Ten thousand pots of Dundee marmalade.

And such other articles as she deemed essential to her comfort and safety during the expedition. In vain I urged that our motto was *Rescue and Retire*, and that such elaborate preparations might prevent our retiring from our native shore, and therefore make rescue exceedingly problematical.

My Tory mother only answered by quoting the example of Lord Wolseley and the Nile Expedition.

'How long did *they* tarry among the pots —the marmalade pots?' said my mother. 'Did *they* start before every mess had its proper share of extra teaspoons in case of accident, and a double supply of patent respirators for the drummer-boys, and of snow-shoes for the

Canadian boatmen in case the climate proved uncertain?'

My mother's historical knowledge, and the unique example of provident and exhaustive equipment which she cited, reduced me to silence, but did not diminish my anxiety. The delay made me nervous, excited, and chippy.

To-morrow morning we were to start.

To-morrow morning was too late.

With an effort I opened the morning paper —the *Morning Post*, as it happened—and ran hastily up and down the columns, active exercise having been recommended to me. What cared I for politics, foreign news, or even the sportive intelligence? All I sought for was a paragraph headed 'Horrible Disclosures,' or, 'Awful Death of a Baronet.' I ran up and down the columns in vain.

No such item of news met my eye. Joy-

ously I rose to go, when my eye fell on the *Standard*.

Mechanically I opened it.

Those words were written (or so they seemed to me to be written) in letters of fire, though the admirable press at Shoe Lane did not really employ that suitable medium.

'HORRIBLE DISCOVERY NEAR RODING.'

At once the truth flashed across me. The *Morning Post* had not contained the intelligence because

THE GOVERNMENT HAD BOYCOTTED THE 'MORNING POST'!

Only journals which more or less supported the Government were permitted to obtain 'copy' of such thrilling interest!

And yet they speak of a free press and a free country!

Tearing myself away from these reflections, I bent my mind on the awful paragraph.

'The melting of the snow has thrown a lurid light on the mysterious disappearance (which up to this moment had attracted no attention) of an eccentric baronet, well known in sporting circles. Yesterday afternoon a gentleman's groom, wading down the highway, discovered the white hat of a gentleman floating on the muddy stream into which the unparalleled weather and the negligence of the Road Trustees has converted our thoroughfare. An inscription in red ink within the lining leaves no doubt that this article of dress is all that is left of the late Sir Runan Errand. The unfortunate nobleman's friends have been communicated with. The active and intelligent representative of the local police believes that he is in possession of a clue to the author of the crime. Probably the body of the murdered noble has been carried down by the flooded road to the sea.'

I tore that paper to pieces, and used it to wrap up sandwiches for the journey.

Once again I say, if you cannot feel with me, throw this tale aside. Heaven knows it is a sombre one, and it goes on getting sombrer and sombrer! But probably, by this time, you have either tossed the work away or looked at the end to see what happened to them all.

The morning dawned.

I filled my bag with Hanover pieces, which I thought might come in handy on the Spanish Turf, and packed up three or four yellow, red, green, and blue opera hats, so useful to the adventurous bookmaker.

At this very moment the postman arrived and gave me a letter in a woman's hand.

I thrust it in my breast pocket recklessly.

The cab rattled away.

At last we were off.

I am sure that no one who could have seen

us that morning would have dreamt that out of that party of three—a more than comfortable-looking English matron, a girl whose strange beauty has been sufficiently dwelt upon, and a gentleman in a yellow crush hat and a book-maker's bag—two were flying from the hands of justice.

Our appearance was certainly such as to disarm all suspicion.

But appearances are proverbially deceitful. Were ours deceitful enough?

'But where are we going?' said my mother, with the short memory of old age.

'To Paris first, then to Spain, and, if needful, down to Khartoum.'

'*Then* you young people will have to go alone. I draw the line at Dongola.'

I glanced at Philippa.

Then for the first time since her malady I saw Philippa blushing! Her long curved

eyelashes hid her eyes, which presumably were also pink, but certainly my mother's broad pleasantry had called a tell-tale blush to the cheek of the young person.

As we drew near Folkestone I remembered the letter, but the sight of the Roding post-mark induced me to defer opening it till we should be on board the steamer. When Philippa was battling with the agonies of the voyage, then, undisturbed, I might ascertain what Mrs. Thompson (for it was sure to be Mrs. Thompson) had to say.

We were now on board. Philippa and my mother fled to the depths of the saloon, and I opened the fateful missive. It began without any conventional formalities, and the very first words blanched a cheek already pale.

'I see yer!'

This strange epistle commenced:—

'*I* know why Sir Runan never reached my

house. I know the reason (it was only too obvious) for *her* strange, excited state. I know how he met the death he deserved.

'I never had the pluck. None of the rest of us ever had the pluck. We all swore we'd swing for him as, one after another, he wedded and deserted us. The Two-headed Nightingale swore it, and the Missing Link, and the Spotted Girl, and the Strong Woman who used to double up horseshoes. Now she doubles up her perambulator with her children in it, but she never doubled up him.

'As to your sister, tell her from me that she is all right. She has made herself his widow, she is the Dowager Lady Errand.

'The fact is, *the Live Mermaid was never alive at all!* She was a put-up thing of wax-work and a stuffed *salmo ferox*. His pretended marriage with *her* is therefore a mere specious

excuse to enable him to avoid your sister's claims.

'Now he is dead, your sister can take the name, title, and estates. I wish she may get them.'

CHAPTER VIII.

LOCAL COLOUR.

I READ the woman's letter again and again, read it with feelings of the most mingled description. First, I reflected with solemn pride that Philippa was *more* than an honest woman; that she really was a baronet's lady! After we were married she should keep her title. Many people do. How well it would sound when we entered a room together—'Dr. South and Lady Errand!'

Yet, on second thoughts, would not this conjunction of names rather set people asking questions?

Yes, disagreeable associations might be revived.

My second thought was that, if Mrs. Thompson kept her word, we might as well go home at once, without bothering about the Soudan. The White Groom, I felt certain, had long been speechless. There was thus no one to connect Lady Errand with the decease of Sir Runan.

Moreover, Philippa's self-respect was now assured. She had lost it when she learned that she was not Sir Runan's wife; she would regain it when she became aware that she had made herself Sir Runan's widow. Such is the character of feminine morality, as I understand the workings of woman's heart.

I had reached this point in my soliloquy, when I reflected that perhaps I had better *not* tell Philippa anything about it.

You see, things were so very mixed, because Philippa's memory was so curiously constructed that she had entirely forgotten the murder

which she had committed; and even if I proved to her by documentary evidence that she had only murdered her own husband, it might not help to relieve her burdened conscience as much as I had hoped. There are times when I almost give up this story in despair. To introduce a heroine who is mad in and out, so to speak, and forgets and remembers things exactly at the right moment, seems a delightfully simple artifice.

But, upon my word, I am constantly forgetting what it is that Philippa should remember, and on the point of making her remember the very things she forgets!

So puzzled had I become that I consoled myself by cursing Sir Runan's memory. *De mortuis nil nisi bonum!*

What a lot of trouble a single little murder, of which one thinks little enough at the time, often gives a fellow.

All this while we were approaching Paris.

The stains of travel washed away, my mother gave a sigh of satisfaction as she seated herself at the dinner table. As any one might guess who looked at her, she was no despiser of the good things of this life!

That very night we went to the Hippodrome, where we met many old acquaintances. My own Artillery Twins were there, and kissed their hands to me as they flew gracefully over our heads towards the desired trapeze. Here, also, was the Tattooed Man, and I grasped his variegated and decorative hand with an emotion I have rarely felt. Without vanity I may say that Philippa and my mother had a *succès fou*.

From the moment when they entered their box every *lorgnette* was fixed upon them.

All Paris was there, the *tout Paris* of *premières*, of *les courses*, the *tout Paris* of *clubs*-

man, of *belles petites*, of ladies *à chignon jaune*. Here were the Booksmen, the *gommeux*, they who *font courir*, the journalists, and here I observed with peculiar interest my great masters, M. Fortuné du Boisgobey and M. Xavier de Montépin.

In the intervals of the performance *tout le monde* crowded into our *loge*, and I observed that my mother and Lady Errand made an almost equal impression on many a gallant and enterprising young *impresario*.

We supped at the *Café Bignon*; toasts were carried; I also was carried home.

Next morning I partly understood the mental condition of Philippa. I had absolutely forgotten the events of the later part of the entertainment.

Several bills arrived for windows, which, it seems, I had broken in a moment of effusion.

Gendarmes arrived, and would have arrested

me on a charge of having knocked down some thirty-seven of their number.

This little matter was easily arranged.

I apologised separately and severally to each of the thirty-seven *braves hommes*, and collectively to the whole corps, the French army, the President, the Republic, and the statue of Strasbourg in the Place de la Concorde. These duties over, I was at leisure to reflect on the injustice of English law.

Certain actions which I had entirely forgotten I expiated at the cost of a few thousand francs, and some dozen apologies.

For only one action, about which she remembered nothing at all, Philippa had to fly from English justice, and give up her title and place in society! Both ladies now charmed me with a narrative of the compliments that had been paid them; both absolutely declined to leave Paris.

'I want to look at the shops,' said my mother.

'I want the *gommeux* to look at me,' said Philippa.

Neither of them saw the least fun in my proposed expedition to Spain.

Weeks passed and found us still in the capital of pleasure.

My large fortune, except a few insignificant thousands, had passed away in the fleeting exhilaration of baccarat.

We must do something to restore our wealth.

My mother had an idea.

'Basil,' she said, 'you speak of Spain. You long to steep yourself in local colour. You sigh for *hidalgos*, *sombreros*, *carbonados*, and *carboncillos*, why not combine business with pleasure?

'Why not take the Alhambra?'

This *was* an idea!

Where could we be safer than under the old Moorish flag?

Philippa readily fell in with my mother's proposal. When woman has once tasted of public admiration, when once she has stepped on the boards, she retires without enthusiasm, even at the age of forty.

'I had thought,' said Philippa, 'of exhibiting myself at the Social Science Congress, and lecturing on self-advertisement and the ethical decline of the Moral Show business, with some remarks on waxworks. But the Alhambra sounds ever so much more toney.'

It was decided on.

I threw away the Baedeker and Murray, and Ford's 'Spain,' on which I had been relying for three chapters of padding and local colour. I ceased to think of the very old churches of St. Croix and St. Seurin and a variety of other

interesting objects. I did not bother about St. Sebastian, and the Valley of the Giralda, and Burgos, the capital of the old Castilian kingdom, and the absorbing glories of the departed Moore. Gladly, gaily, I completed the necessary negotiations, and found myself, with Philippa, my mother, and many of my old *troupe*, in the dear old Alhambra, safe under the shelter of the gay old Moorish flag.

Shake off black gloom, Basil South, and make things skip.

You have conquered Fate!

CHAPTER IX.

SAVED! SAVED!

LORIOUS, wonderful Alhambra! Magical Cuadrado de Leicestero! Philippa and I were as happy as children, and the house was full every night.

We called everything by Spanish names, and played perpetually at being Spaniards.

The *foyer* we named a *patio*—a space fragrant with the perfume of oranges, which the public were always sucking, and perilous with peel. Add to this a refreshment-room, *refectorio*, full of the rarest old *cigarros*, and redolent of *agua de soda* and *aguardiente*. Here the *botellas* of *agua de soda* were continually popping, and the *corchos* flying with a

murmur of merry voices and of mingling waters. Here half through the night you could listen to—

> The delight of happy laughter,
> The delight of low replies.

With such surroundings, almost those of a sybarite, who can blame me for being lulled into security, and telling myself that my troubles were nearly at an end? Who can wonder at the *châteaux en Espagne* that I built as I lounged in the *patio*, and assisted my customers to consume the *media agua de soda*, or 'split soda,' of the country? Sometimes we roamed as far as the Alcazar; sometimes we wandered to the Oxford, or laughed light-heartedly in the stalls of the *Alegria*.

Such was our life. So in calm and peace (for we had secured a Tory *chuckerouto* from Birmingham) passed the even tenor of out days.

As to marrying Philippa, it had always been my *intention*.

Whether she was or was not Lady Errand; whether she had or had not precipitated the hour of her own widowhood, made no kind of difference to me.

A moment of ill-judged haste had been all her crime.

That moment had passed.

Philippa was not that moment. I was not marrying that moment, but Philippa.

Picture, then, your Basil naming and insisting on the day, yet somehow the day had not yet arrived. It did, however, arrive at last.

The difficulty now arose under which name was Philippa to be married?

To tell you the truth, I cannot remember under which name Philippa *was* married.

It was a difficult point.

If she wedded me under her maiden name,

and if Mrs. Thompson's letter contained the truth, then would the wedding be legal and binding?

If she married me under the name of Lady Errand, and if Mrs. Thompson's letter was false, then would the wedding be all square?

So far as I know, there is no monograph on the subject, or there was none at the time.

Be it as it may, wedded we were.

Morality was now restored to the show business, the legitimate drama began to look up, and the hopes of the Social Science Congress were fulfilled.

But evil days were at hand.

One day, Philippa and I were lounging in the *patio*, when I heard the young *hidalgos*—or *Macheros*, as they are called—talking as they smoked their princely *cigaritos*.

'Sir Runan Errand,' said one of them; 'where he's gone under. A rare bad lot he was.'

'Murdered,' replied the other. 'Nothing ever found of him but his hat.'

'What a rum go!' replied the other.

I looked at Philippa. She had heard all. I saw her dark brow contract in anguish. She was beating her breast furiously—her habit in moments of agitation.

Then I seem to remember that I and the two *hidalgos* bore Philippa to a couch in the *patio*, while I smiled and smiled and talked of the heat of the weather!

When Philippa came back to herself, she looked at me with her wondrous eyes and said,—

'Basil, tell me the square truth, honest Injun! What had I been up to that night?'

CHAPTER X.

NOT TOO MAD, BUT JUST MAD ENOUGH.

IT was out! She knew!

What was I to say, how evade her impulsive cross-examinations. I fell back upon evasions.

'Why do I want to know?' she echoed, 'because I choose to! I hated him. He took a walk, I took a walk, and I had taken something before I took a walk. If we met, I was bound to have words with him. Basil, did I dream it, or read it long ago in some old penny dreadful of the past?'

Philippa occasionally broke into blank verse like this, but not often.

'Dearest, it must have been a dream,'

I said, catching at this hope of soothing her.

'No, no!' she screamed; 'no—no dream. Not any more, thank you! I can see myself standing now over that crushed white mass! Basil, I could never bear him in that hat, and I must have gone for him!'

I consoled Philippa as well as I could, but she kept screaming.

'*How* did I kill him?'

'Goodness only knows, Philippa,' I replied; 'but you had a key in your hand—a door-key.'

'Ah, that fatal latch-key!' she said, 'the cause of our final quarrel. Where is it? What have you done with it?' she shouted.

'I threw it away,' I replied. This was true, but I could not think of anything better to say.

'You threw it away! Didn't you know it

would become a *pièce justificatif?*' said my poor Philippa, who had not read Gaboriau to no purpose.

I passed the night wrestling in argument with Philippa. She reproached me for having returned from Spain, 'which was quite safe, you know—it is the place city men go to when they bust up,' she remarked in her peculiarly idiomatic style. She reproved me for not having told her all about it before, in which case she would never have consented to return to England.

'They will try me—they will hang me!' she repeated.

'Not a bit,' I answered. 'I can prove that you were quite out of your senses when you did for him.'

'*You* prove it!' she sneered; 'a pretty lawyer *you* are. Why, they won't take a husband's evidence for or against a wife in a

criminal case. This comes of your insisting on marrying me.'

'But I doubt if we *are* married, Philippa, dear, as we never could remember whether you were wedded under your maiden name or as Philippa Errand. Besides——' I was going to say that William, the White Groom (late the Sphynx), could show to her having been (as he once expressed it) as 'crazy as a loon,' but I remembered in time. William had, doubtless, long been speechless.

The sherry must have done its fatal work.

This is the worst of committing crimes.

They do nothing, very often, but complicate matters.

Had I not got rid of William—but it was too late for remorse. As to the evidence of her nurses, I forgot all about *that*. I tried to console Philippa on another line.

I remarked that, if she had 'gone for' Sir Runan, she had only served him right.

Then I tried to restore her self-respect by quoting the bearded woman's letter.

I pointed out that she had been Lady Errand, after all.

This gave Philippa no comfort.

'It makes things worse,' she said. 'I thought I had only got rid of my betrayer; and now you say I have killed my husband. You men have no tact.'

'Besides,' Philippa went on, after pausing to reflect, 'I have not bettered myself one bit. If I had not gone for him I would be Lady Errand, and no end of a swell, and now I'm only plain Mrs. Basil South.'

Speaking thus, Philippa wept afresh, and refused to be comforted.

Her remarks were not flattering to my self-esteem.

At this time I felt, with peculiar bitterness, the blanks in Philippa's memory. Nothing is more difficult than to make your heroine not too mad, but just mad enough.

Had Philippa been a trifle saner, or less under the influence of luncheon, at first, she would either never have murdered Sir Runan at all (which perhaps would have been the best course), or she would have known *how* she murdered him.

The entire absence of information on this head added much to my perplexities.

On the other hand, had Philippa been a trifle madder, or *more* under the influence of luncheon, nothing could ever have recalled the event to her memory at all.

As it is, my poor wife (if she *was* my wife, a subject on which I intend to submit a monograph to a legal contemporary), my poor wife was almost provoking in what she forgot and what she remembered.

One day as my dear patient was creeping about the *patio*, she asked me if I saw *all* the papers?

I said I saw most of them.

'Well, look at them *all*, for who knows how many may be boycotted by the present Government? In a boycotted print you don't know but you may miss an account of how some fellow was hanged for what I did. I believe two people can't be executed for the same crime. Now, if any one swings for Sir Runan, *I* am safe; but it might happen, and you never know it.'

Dear Philippa, ever thoughtful for others! I promised to read every one of the papers, and I was soon rewarded for the unparalleled tedium of these studies.

CHAPTER XI.

A TERRIBLE TEMPTATION.

I HATE looking back and reading words which I have written when the printer's devil was waiting for copy in the hall, but I fancy I have somewhere called this tale a confession; if not, I meant to do so. It has no more claim to be called a work of art than the cheapest penny dreadful.

How could it?

It holds but two characters, a man and a woman.

All the rest are the merest supers. Perhaps you may wonder that I thus anticipate criticism; but review-writing is so easy that I

may just as well fill up with this as with any other kind of padding.

My publisher insists on so many pages of copy. When he does not get what he wants, the language rich and powerful enough to serve his needs has yet to be invented.

But he struggles on with the help of a dictionary of American expletives.

However, we are coming to the conclusion, and that, I think, will waken the public up! And yet this chapter will be a short one. It will be the review of a struggle against a temptation to commit, not perhaps crime, but an act of the grossest bad taste.

To that temptation I succumbed; we both succumbed.

It is a temptation to which I dare think poor human nature has rarely been subjected.

The temptation to go and see a man, a fellow-creature, tried for a crime which one's

wife committed, and to which one is an accessory after the fact.

Oh, that morning!

How well I remember it.

Breakfast was just over, the table with its relics of fragrant bloaters and *terrine* of *paté* still stood in the *patio*.

I was alone. I loafed lazily and at my ease.

Then I lighted a princely *havanna*, blaming myself for profaning the scented air from *el Cuadro de Leicestero*.

You see I have such a sensitive æsthetic conscience.

Then I took from my pocket the *Sporting Times*, and set listlessly to work to skim its lengthy columns.

This was owing to my vow to Philippa, that I would read every journal published in England. As the day went on, I often sat

with them up to my shoulders, and littering all the *patio*.

I ran down the topics of the day. This scene is an 'under-study,' by the way, of the other scene in which I read of the discovery of Sir Runan's hat. At last I turned my attention to the provincial news column. A name, a familiar name, caught my eye; the name of one who, I had fondly fancied, had long lain unburied in my cellar at the 'pike. My princely *havanna* fell unheeded on the marble pavement of the *patio*, as with indescribable amazement I read the following 'par.'

'William Evans, the man accused of the murder of Sir Runan Errand, will be tried at the Newnham Assizes on the 20th. The case, which excites considerable interest among the *élite* of Roding and district, will come on the *tapis* the first day of the meeting. The evidence will be of a purely circumstantial kind.'

Every word of that 'par' was a staggerer. I sat as one stunned, dazed, stupid, motionless, with my eye on the sheet.

Was ever man in such a situation before?

Your wife commits a murder.

You become an accessory after the fact.

You take steps to destroy one of the two people who suspect the truth.

And then you find that the man on whom you committed murder is accused of the murder which you and your wife committed.

The sound of my mother's voice scolding Philippa wakened me from my stupor. They were coming.

I could not face them.

Doubling up the newspaper, I thrust it into my pocket, and sped swiftly out of the *patio*.

Where did I go? I scarcely remember. I think it must have been to one of the public

gardens or public-houses, I am not certain which. All sense of locality left me. I found at last some lonely spot, and there I threw myself on the ground, dug my finger-nails into the dry ground, and held on with all the tenacity of despair. In the wild whirl of my brain I feared that I might be thrown off into infinite space. This sensation passed off. At first I thought I had gone mad. Then I felt pretty certain that it must be the other people who had gone mad.

I had killed William Evans.

My wife had killed Runan Errand.

How, then, could Runan Errand have been killed by William Evans?

'Which is absurd,' I found myself saying, in the language of Eukleidês, the grand old Greek.

Human justice! What is justice? See how it can err! Was there ever such a bound-

less, unlimited blunder in the whole annals of penny fiction? Probably not. I remember nothing like it in all the learned pages of the *London Journal* and the *Family Herald*. Mrs. Henry Wood and Miss Braddon never dreamed of aught like this. Philippa *must* be told. It was too good a joke. Would she laugh? Would she be alarmed?

Picture me lying on the ground, with the intelligence fresh in my mind.

I felt confidence, on the whole, in Philippa's sense of humour.

Then rose the temptation.

Trust this man (William Evans, late the Sphynx) to the vaunted array of justice!

Let him have a run for his money.

Nay, more.

Go down and see the fun!

Why hesitate? You cannot possibly be implicated in the deed. You will enjoy a posi-

tion nearly unique in human history. You will see the man, of whose murder you thought you were guilty, tried for the offence which you know was committed by your wife.

Every sin is not easy. My sense of honour arose against this temptation. I struggled, but I was mastered. I *would* go and see the trial. Home I went and broached the subject to Philippa. The brave girl never blenched. She had no hesitations, no scruples to conquer.

'Oh, Basil,' she exclaimed, with sparkling eyes, 'wot larx! When do we start?'

The reader will admit that I did myself no injustice when, at the commencement of this tale, I said I had wallowed in crime.

CHAPTER XII.

JUDGE JUGGINS.

WE got down to Newnham, where the 'Sizes were held, on the morning of September 20th. There we discovered that we had an hour or two for refreshment, and I may say that both Philippa and I employed that time to the best advantage. While at the hotel I tried to obtain the file of the *Times*. I wanted to look back and see if I could find the account of the magisterial proceedings against the truly unlucky William Evans.

After all, should I call him unlucky? He had escaped the snare I had laid for him, and

perhaps (such things have been) even a Newnham jury might find him not guilty.

But the file of the *Times* was not forthcoming.

I asked the sleepy-eyed Teutonic waiter for it. He merely answered, with the fatuous patronising grin of the German *kellner* :—

'You vant?'

'I want the file of the *Times!*'

'I have the corkscrew of the good landlord; but the file of the *Times* I have it not. Have you your boots, your fish-sauce, your curry-comb?' he went on. Then, lapsing into irrelevant local gossip, 'the granddaughter of the blacksmith has the landing-net of the bad tailor.'

'I want my bill, my note, my *addition*, my *consommation*,' I answered angrily.

'Very good bed, very good post-horse,' he replied at random, and I left the County Hotel

without being able to find out why suspicion had fallen on William Evans.

We hailed one of the cabs which stood outside the hotel door, when a heavy hand was laid on my shoulder, and a voice, strange but not unfamiliar, exclaimed, 'Dr. South, as I am a baronet——'

I turned round suddenly and found myself face to face with

SIR RUNAN ERRAND!

My brain once more began to reel. Here were the real victim and the true perpetrators of a murder come to view the trial of the man who was charged with having committed it!

Though I was trembling like an aspen leaf, I remembered that we lived in an age of 'telepathy' and psychical research.

Sir Runan was doubtless what Messrs. Myers and Gurney call a *visible apparition* as

distinguished from the common *invisible apparition.*

If a real judge confesses, like Sir E. Hornby, to having seen a ghost, why should not a mere accessory after the fact?

Regaining my presence of mind, I asked, 'What brings you here?'

'Oh, to see the fun,' he replied. 'Fellow being tried for killing me. The morbid interest excited round here is very great. Doubt your getting front seats.'

'Can't you manage it for me?' I asked imploringly.

'Daresay I can. Here, take my card, and just mention my name, and they'll let you in. Case for the prosecution, by the way, *most* feeble.'

Here the appearance, handing me a card, nodded, and vanished in the crowd.

I returned to Philippa, where I had left her

in the four-wheeler. We drove off, and found ourselves before a double-swinging (ay, ominous as it seemed, *swinging*) plain oak door, over which in old English letters was written—

Criminal Court.[1]

I need not describe the aspect of the court. Probably most of my readers have at some time in their lives found themselves in such a place.

True to the minute, the red-robed Judge appears. It is Sir Joshua Juggins, well known for his severity as 'Gibbeting Juggins.'

Ah, there is little hope for William Evans.

I have learned from a neighbour in court the evidence against Evans is purely circumstantial.

He has been found in possession of a peculiar key, believed to have belonged to Sir Runan.

Well may they call the case for the prosecution weak.

William must have found that fatal key which Philippa took from the slain man.

On that accident the whole presumption of his guilt is founded.

The Grand Jury (country gentlemen—idiots all!) find a 'True Bill.'

The clerk reads the indictment that 'he, William Evans, did feloniously, wilfully, and of malice aforethought, kill and murder Sir Runan Errand, Baronet.'

As the reading goes on Philippa is strangely moved.

'Basil,' she whispered, 'don't you see the splendid, unequalled chance for an advertisement! I'll get up and make a speech, and say *I* did it. Of course they can't prove it, but it will set every one talking, and bring

hundreds of pounds into the house every night.'

I now observed that Philippa had half slipped off her mantle and bonnet. Beneath these coverings she was dressed in wig and gown, like Mrs. Weldon in the photographs.

'For goodness' sake, Philippa, *don't!*' I whispered.

The clerk turned to William Evans, the prisoner at the Bar.

'Are you guilty, or not guilty?'

In the silence a cigarette-ash might have been heard to drop, if any one had been smoking.

The long silence was broken, but not by the prisoner.

By Philippa!

Rising to all her stately height, with her flowing robes around her, she stood at bay. Then her clear deep voice rang out:—

'My lord, I was the party that did it!'

'Order in the court! order in the court!' cried the ushers.

'I commit you! I commit you!' thundered Lord Justice Juggins. 'Take her away. Five years and hard labour.'

Struggling violently, Philippa was dragged away by the minions of the law.

I notice one visitor turn round, and gaze at the commotion.

It is Mrs. Thompson, the Bearded Woman.

Silence has scarcely been restored, when it is again broken.

A manly form rises. A deep voice exclaims:—

'My lord, the prisoner is innocent. *I* am the person whom he is said to have murdered.'

The form, the voice—it is Sir Runan Errand!

Again I hear the sharp accents of Mr. Justice Juggins.

'Is this court a bear-garden or the House of Commons? Take that man out. Give him five years and two dozen lashes.'

Scarcely had the court resumed its wonted aspect of business, scarcely had the prisoner again been asked to plead, when a shrill voice shattered the stillness.

'My lord, the key found in the prisoner's possession is my cellar-key.'

This time the bold interrupter was Mrs. Thompson, the Bearded Woman.

'Five years as usual, and hard labour,' said Sir Joshua Juggins, wearily.

He was tiring of his task.

'Please, my lord, it warn't none of me,' came a hoarse whisper from the prisoner at the bar.

'Who asked *you* to speak? Is that the way to plead?' snapped the judge. 'Give him five years also, for contempt of court.'

William Evans was carried out in hysterics.

The plot, the mystery had thickened.

I now felt that there was only one way of fathoming the secret of the crime. I also must get myself committed! Then I would be able to rejoin the other actors in this strange drama, and learn their motives, and the real facts of the case.

In a moment my resolution was taken.

Springing to my feet, I exclaimed in clarion tones:—

'My lord, I am an accessory after the fact.'

Sir Joshua Juggins gave a cry of despair. Then mastering himself, he whispered:—

'Take that idiot away, and give him penal servitude for life.'

As I left the court in chains, I heard the next case being called.

CHAPTER XIII.

CLEARED UP.

(FROM THE 'GREEN PARK GAZETTE.')

HE legitimate public interest in the Newnham Mystery suggested to us the propriety of sending one of our young men down to interview all parties. After having visited the Maori King, Mrs. Weldon, several Eminent Advertisers, and the crew of the *Mignonette*, he felt that his present task was a light one. He had to see the murderer, William Evans; the murderess, Mrs. South, or Lady Errand; the accessory after the fact, Dr. South; the victim, Sir Runan Errand; and Mrs. Thompson, the owner

of the key on which the case for the prosecution hinged.

His adventures in the various Asylums where those unhappy persons are unconfined have little public interest. We print the Confessions just as our young man took them down in shorthand from the lips of the sufferers.

The Confession of Sir Runan Errand.

'I need not tell you that I never was even the husband of the woman Philippa at all. She stood in no relation to me, except as one of the persons in the *troupe* which I was foolish enough to manage. Instead of visiting her in January last to settle her pecuniary claims against me, I sent my valet. It appears that the man wore an old hat of mine, which he lost in the storm. That was not the only article of property belonging to me he carried

off. I have since had a penitent letter from him. He is doing well in the United States, and has been elected to the Legislature. I have given up the freak of dabbling in the show business, and merely keep a private theatre at such a distance from human abodes that no one can complain of it as a nuisance. Since the disappearance of my valet I have been travelling in my own yacht. I reached England the day before the trial.

'No. I never read the newspapers. Thank goodness I am no bookworm.'

The Confession of Philippa South, *calling herself* Lady Errand.

'I tell you again, as I told you before, I know nothing about what I did that night. Go back to your employers.'

Nothing more of a nature suited to our columns could be extracted from this lady.

The Confession of Mrs. Thompson.

'I lost my cellar key the night Philippa left my roof. I now recognise it as the key in the possession of William Evans. How he got it I have no idea whatever.'

The Confession of Basil South, M.D.

'I begin to understand it all at last. The key which I took from Philippa on the night of the storm and supposed murder had not been taken by her from Sir Runan.

'She had brought it with her from the house of Mrs. Thompson, with whom she had been residing.

'When I threw away a key, which I believed to be the one I had taken from Philippa, I made a mistake.

'I threw away a key of my own. When I thought I was giving William Evans the key of my cellar (with fatal intentions and designs, hoping that he would never survive the contents of that cellar), I really gave him the key I had taken from Philippa.

'Consequently the key would not fit the cellar lock.

'Consequently William Evans never tasted the fatal fluid, and so escaped his doom.

'I have nothing to add to this confession, except that I am deeply penitent, and will never again offer a thoughtless public a Christmas Annual so absurd, morbid, and incoherent.'

This last statement made it unnecessary to interview William Evans.

All the other persons in this dismal affair are detained during her Majesty's displeasure.

It is sincerely hoped that, after a year of seclusion from penny fiction and French criminal romances, they will find a less credulous public, or will produce something not quite so morally dismal and artistically inefficient as the model of

'MUCH DARKER DAYS.'

LONDON: PRINTED BY
SPOTTISWOODE AND CO., NEW-STREET SQUARE
AND PARLIAMENT STREET

PR4876
M85
1884